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Contemporary Music and the Manufacturing Region: Reflections on Reality

John R. Mullin and Tracie Seder Hines

Despite long odds, some distressed, high unemployment regions in the United States survive, revitalize, and prosper. While there are many reasons for their success, we hypothesize that a strong sense of community helps make bearable the anger, frustration, despair, and irrationality that accompany high job losses in a region.

We looked at job loss in New England regions heavy with mill or factory work, the regions most familiar to us, and found job loss is a societal trend regularly reflected in popular culture through contemporary music. Contemporary folk and rock music expresses the feelings of the laid-off mill workers, including anger, frustration, despair, and irrationality. The workers' feelings contribute to the molding of a sense of region, of place, and of a resiliency necessary to maintain the community.

This cultural dimension to the region is as resonant with the peoples of a region as the political, geographic, market, or other dimension. This cultural dimension of regionalism as defined by music, art, literature, or even humor, conveys valuable information. It is a different kind of message than many researchers are accustomed to examining. Based on our experiences with mill communities and their contemporary music, we would recommend that researchers elsewhere might gain valuable knowl-

edge through similar investigations into regional cultural expressions.

Mill town residents live the stories of the music, and, by listening carefully to the words of these songs, we, as regional administrators, planners, and economic development officials, are better able to understand the "gut" level sentiments of our working constituency. Better communication and better planning seem to result.

We have chosen contemporary folk and rock music for our review. These forms of music, we believe, have reflected the evolution of the mill town experience of the region as well as other regions of the midwest and northeast far more than any other.

Introduction

The manufacturing base of the United States is evolving dramatically as it moves to handle the challenges of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the European Union, and the competition of Asian nations. The impact of the global economy is evident both in the celebrated economy of the Pacific Northwest where high-tech and aviation firms flourish and in the desolate industrial landscapes of New England where mill after mill lies vacant.

This grimmer story is the one we wish to explore, a story compounded in New

England by the recession of the early 1990s that brought the realities of this change even more quickly to millions of workers (Markusen 1993). This story begins in the mill towns of Massachusetts in many places: in the angry eyes of workers who thought that commitment to a firm would be a ticket to a stable lifelong income; in the voices of parents and grandparents who worked the mills for generations only to tell their children that the family must move away in order to survive.

What intrigues us is the personal responses of these workers and how they contribute to the molding of a sense of region, of place and of a resiliency necessary to maintain the community. As industrial planners and researchers, we have been actively involved in the efforts to revitalize industrial communities and regions across the northeast and midwest. With few competitive advantages available to these communities, revitalization has been a challenge. Yet, many are able to survive, revitalize, and prosper. While there are many possibilities for their success, we suggest that a strong sense of community makes bearable the anger, frustration, despair, and irrationality. We have noted these feelings through observing hours of community meetings, union strategy sessions, and planning board hearings. We have also listened as mill worker after mill worker explained the difficulty of leaving places they loved in search of work. They know that their lives are difficult, their wages low and that they are subject to economic changes that are worldwide in scope.

And still, they struggle to stay where they are. We have observed this phenomenon through our work and research in Central Pennsylvania, Southern Michigan, upstate New York, and several industrial regions in New England.

Nowhere, however, have we seen the feelings as resurgent as in the small mill

communities along the Mohawk Trail between Gardner and North Adams, Massachusetts. We have been professionally active in this region, acquiring some understanding of mill town culture. The 20 communities, with a combined population of approximately 80,000 and connected by State Route 2, form part of what the state's tourism officials call "Up Country" Massachusetts. This rural region has long had a tradition of making furniture, cutlery, precision machines, plastics, and textiles. It still has a manufacturing base but it is a shadow of its past.

For this region, job opportunities are far fewer than in the past, pay scales have not kept pace with those of other regions, there is less of a sense of community, and there is a feeling of uneasiness concerning the future. Loss of the job is only part of the picture. Fear of erosion of community formed by family, neighbor, church, club, and school, as well as a feeling of being economically isolated and adrift, forms the other part.

There is often a strong feeling of nostalgia in these mill communities, a factor common to other declining communities as well (Dunwell 1978, Haraven 1978). This nostalgia forgets the brutal and often demeaning aspects of life in these small communities, a work environment that often bordered on industrial servitude: a life governed by the whistle, the freak accident, the next contract, and the whims of an often absentee management. One's place in the community has been determined by the roar of the turbine, the color of a blanket, the blast of a furnace, or the tautness of a string; people and product are inextricably tied together (Kulik, Parks, and Pirun 1982). Not surprisingly, these conditions frequently created climates of anger, frustration, despair, and irrationality, sentiments that nostalgia blurs.

For several years we struggled with means and methods to examine the feelings

that these mill workers expressed. We knew of surveys that attempted to obtain the reactions of displaced mill workers but thought that they were too impersonal. We also knew of oral history projects that obtained the "stories" of these workers. These, unfortunately, lacked a means of consolidation.

Finally, one of our clients suggested that we listen to current "rock" music, for it is in this cultural medium that she felt a sense of the mill community could be best noted. We took her advice and were stunned. After visiting music librarians, reviewing archival material, and interviewing disc jockeys, we came away with a belief that contemporary music frequently provides a means of expressing the feelings of these workers. One can sense their emotions in the words and voices of Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, and John Mellencamp, among others.

Common Themes

We have noted three common themes to the songs we heard.

The first theme is of despair, anger, and resentment with implications of a broken commitment. This anger is often directed at the distant mill or factory owner, but also can be directed towards the changing societal conditions over which the worker has no control.

The second theme is one of a lost way of life and a change in local conditions or a change in the community. At times, the entire social fabric of a community has been altered. As Billy Joel notes in *Allentown*, after reflecting on the closing of the city's factories: "Out in Bethlehem they're killing time, filling out forms, standing in line."

The third theme is a clear lament for the worker and the loss that has been suffered due to these changing conditions as well as the lack of options that the worker has in regard to other avenues of employment. This

theme is poignantly presented in Sting's *We Work the Black Seam*. The workers, in this song, have just lost their jobs and are bitter: "Your dark satanic mills have made redundant all our skills...We matter more than pounds and pence, your economic theory makes no sense." There is no romance in this lament as is often the case when a song cries for a lost love. There is only bitterness, anger, and resentment for a society and/or a system that has abandoned the individuals who have worked in the industries that helped to make this country what it is today. Interestingly, Sting picked up on the phrase "Satanic Mills." This is one of the most famous phrases used to describe the negative aspects of mill life. It comes from one of William Blake's prefatory poems. (Van Doren 1976, 1155).

The Songs

Leaving

*So they're moving somewhere, now,
with their cloths and fabric press.
They've found themselves another town
where they'll make the shirts for less,
And that is why he said last night he won't
watch the old town die.
But I would not take what he tried to
leave when he told me good-bye,
Oh, it's good-bye.
(Chapin 1979)*

Harry Chapin introduces the above song by speaking: "This is really a song about a one-horse town when the one horse decides to up and leave." This song, sung from a women's perspective, portrays the hard choices that families have had to make. After the factory closes, her man has to leave in search of work, he "won't watch the old town die." So, he loses a job and she loses her lover. All involved parties lose, including the town which is left to die.

In the referenced song, we note that the man leaves town and the woman does not. Here we see an example where there is a choice of family, community, and unemployment (or falling incomes) on one side as opposed to risk, opportunity, and choice on the other.

This scenario is played out in virtually every declining mill town in America. The elderly, the uneducated, and underskilled remain, while the young, the educated, the risk taker, and the skilled leave. When these choices involve families with long ties to the community, they are all painful. This leaving worker, obviously a textile man, will seek out employment in another town "...where they will make the shirts for less..." and, consequently, where he will be paid less. And so the cycle will continue. As the musician Sting noted in *We Work the Black Seam*: "This place has changed for good, the economic theory said it would, it's hard for us to understand, we can't give up our jobs the way we should."

These themes of despair, anger, and resentment are seen over and over in contemporary songs about factory or mill towns. Somewhere along the way, an implied commitment evolved from the factory owners to the workers as well as to the community that grew around the jobs which these factories and mills produced. Granted, there often was no written contractual agreement between the job producers and the workers or the community. But over time, as communities grew around these job-producing industries, an implied commitment came to be. This commitment implied that as long as the workers perform at these physically demanding and often mundane jobs, they would receive compensation. Out of this came the expectation that the jobs would stay within the community and the company would not "bail out" to an area where it might be cheaper to produce.

Imagery

*At the end of the town, at the foot
of the hill,
Stands a chimney so tall that says
Aragon Mill,
But there's no smoke at all coming out of
the stack,
For the mill has pulled out and it "ain't
coming back."
(Kahn 1974)*

These lyrics are reflective of a social phenomenon which has been taking place over the past 30 years or so. They ring of abandonment and betrayal. These songs are about the men and women who worked in the industries that literally helped to build their community and their country, and have had their jobs and industries exported, first to other regions within their country and later out of their country entirely. How these changes have affected the actual community and culture of this country is arguably larger than we have yet acknowledged.

Kahn's lyrics also provide two key images of the mill community.

In the first line we learn that the mill is at the *end* of town and *bottom* of the hill. It is as if the placing of the structure itself signifies it is the "last hope" for the worker. This point is reinforced in Springsteen's *Factory* where he wrote: "Men walk through these gates with death in their eyes." In reality, Khan is partially correct; in most of the Slateresque mill towns of the Northeast, for example, the mill is at the bottom of the hill but at the center of the village or town (Dunwell 1978, 52).

The second image is of the dominating stack. It typically towers over all other structures in the community. When the mills were active, the chimney billowed smoke and cinders throughout the community. When it stood quiet it symbolized the lack of work. Nowhere can its poignancy be better observed than in a line from Springsteen's

Youngstown: "Them smokestacks reaching like the arms of God into the beautiful sky of soot and clay here in Youngstown..." The chimney is indeed a powerful symbol. In fact, in two mill communities where we have worked the townspeople have kept the chimneys alone as symbols of the past, while tearing down the mill structures themselves. The Canadian historian Rex Lucas has asked: "at what point in history... had industry given rise or transformed the community?" (Lucas 1971, 1). The answer may be when the mill at the end of town and bottom of the hill dominates the community.

The Loss of the Mill

*Now Main Street's whitewashed windows
and vacant stores,
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to
come down here no more,
They're closing down the textile mill across
the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going boys
and they ain't coming back
To your hometown, your hometown, your
hometown, your hometown.
(Springsteen 1984)*

Pete Seeger's *Aragon Mill* (as written by Si Kahn) and Bruce Springsteen's *My Hometown* both include the same phrase about the future of the mill: "...it ain't coming back." As recently as January 1997, we were involved with a one industry town in New England where the mill recently closed. Asked by community leaders to advise the townspeople about the future of this 19th century relic that has been undermaintained for decades, we concluded that there was little hope. As we spoke and the room became quieter and quieter, we saw tears and sadness. In this community, we expect that the words of Kahn and Springsteen will be heard with great frequency in the years to come.

Our old mill communities, too frequently, do not match the needs of contem-

porary manufacturing. They typically are not suitable for modern production, do not match current codes, and are isolated from major transportation centers. In an era where any production-related inefficiency is cause for alarm, these structures simply cannot compete (Kotval and Mullin 1994, 303). They are part of a sad element of American industrial policy that favors "green field" sites over "brown field" sites (Kotval and Mullin 1993, 18). The former are typically in growing areas, built on clean lands, enable new structures to be built, and have modern infrastructure elements. The latter are old, were built for outmoded production, do not match current environmental regulations, and are on cramped parcels.

Old mill sites frequently require extraordinary efforts to be revitalized and maintained (Grillo 1996, J1). When these costs become exorbitant, they will be closed. Indeed, three years ago we noted that the headquarters and "flag ship" structure of the mega-sized Digital Equipment Corporation, the 19th century Assabet Mill (Maynard, Massachusetts) was closed with virtually no protest; it was simply "business." It still lies vacant (Schneider 1995, 1).

On Mills and Patriotism

Our revitalization efforts across the Northeast have placed us in seemingly countless union halls, American Legion halls, and Veterans of Foreign Wars meeting rooms. These places, typically underheated and musty, are full of concerned workers who are largely male, over 50, overweight, and a bit distrustful of outside "experts." These men feel there is a direct connection between their work and the good of the nation. John Mellencamp summarizes this point succinctly in his *Minutes to Memories*. He sings a story of an old man who is finally going home: "I worked my whole life in the steel mills of Gary...and my father

before me, I help build this land." This theme can also be noted in the words of Springsteen and Joel. Springsteen's lyrics, centering on returning veterans, focuses on the expectation that if the worker fought for his or her nation then that worker would be provided with a good paying job. This theme is vividly depicted in *Born in the USA* where Springsteen, in the words of a returning Vietnam veteran trying to obtain a job, sings the following: "Came back home to the refinery, hiring man says, 'Son if it was up to me'...Went down to see my V.A. man, he said, 'Son you don't understand now...'" Billy Joel's *Allentown* makes a similar point in which he laments the decline of the city: "Every child has a pretty good shot, to get at least as far as their old man got...but something happened on the way to that place, they threw an American flag in our face."

The lyrics in these cases indirectly place the responsibility for the downsizing of the mill on the government. Indeed, in New England, government actions have long contributed toward a sense of bitterness among mill workers. Nowhere have we observed this more directly than at the Smith and Wesson factory in Springfield, Massachusetts. This long-term manufacturer of .45 millimeter pistols for United States military forces, lost the contract for an updated pistol to Beretta, an Italian company. This was perceived, by many mill workers, as a betrayal of the Smith and Wesson workers and a "sellout" of American values. The workers cared little about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's procurement policies. All they perceived was that their country was taking away their jobs and giving them to foreigners (Cox 1992, 17).

Self Esteem and Drudgery

The mill worker, at least based on the music we have collected, has little positive

to say about him or herself. The jobs are dead-ended, mindless, and boring. This point can be vividly noted in Simple Minds' *Factory*: "Up and down, going round, going round 'til we drown again." James Taylor in *Millworker* echoes similar thoughts: "Mill work ain't easy, mill work ain't hard, mill work ain't nothing but an awfully boring job." Singing the lament of a widow of a "No good mill working man from Massachusetts," Taylor's words further reflect on the economic entrapment that occurs in so many of these communities: "It's me and my machine...for the rest of my life." This theme is picked up in song after song where the repetitive nature of the manufacturing process is pictured as a curse. Kahn has written in *Aragon Mills*: "And the only tune I hear is the sound of the wind...as it blows through the town, weave and spin, weave and spin." John Gorka's *Down in the Milltown* reflects a similar thought: "Down in the milltown, the mill town so low, hang your head over, feel the wind blow." While we obtain a picture of dullness, repetition, and monotony, the fact remains that these people have jobs.

It is here that we, as planners and residents, have become somewhat distressed. We know the character of these jobs. We know that many of the workers would like to do something exciting, innovative, and mind expanding. And we know that these jobs are evaporating too quickly. What do we do? In the final analysis, we quietly are grateful that these jobs are located in our community, fully knowing that the community down the road would happily accept them (Rosenfeld 1992).

How do we break out of this mind-breaking dullness? Perhaps it's our dreams, perhaps it's our willingness to take risk or perhaps we write ourselves off and make sure that our children don't suffer a similar fate. Simon and Garfunkel, in their song entitled *Richard Cory*, show that there is at least a

desire to break away. The song focuses on the owner of the local factory (Richard Cory) who is rich and who "owns one-half of this whole town." In the chorus is a set of angry lines that are expressed by a worker desiring to get out of his/her environment: "...I curse the life I'm livin' and I curse my poverty and I wish that I could be...I wish I could be Richard Cory." Like so many mill workers, at least in mill music, there is no evidence that our worker leaves.

On Paternalism

The all-controlling, paternalistic powers of the mill owner is a common theme of mill town studies and literature (Garner 1984, 53-76). They can be noted in the towns developed by Samuel Slater, the Boston Associates, and even the famed bestseller of the 1950's, *Peyton Place* (Metalious 1956). Our songwriters are no different. In Springsteen's *Youngstown*, the song concludes: "Once I made you rich enough, rich enough to forget my name." And James Taylor sings the line: "So I may work the mills, just as long as I'm able to never meet the man whose name is on the label." Once again, we see the anonymity of the worker and the attitude of management that workers and machines were virtually interchangeable. Management in early mill communities, as Walkowitz noted, expected the workers to think and act as if they were part of the corporate team (Walkowitz 1981, 247). When workers did not take on this attitude, the owners sought increasing police powers to control worker behavior.

These powers no longer exist today, yet there is still a strong legacy of control in mill communities. As Zevon and Dylan have written in *The Factory*: "yes sir, no sir, yes sir, no sir, yes sir, no sir, WORK!" Springsteen also uses "sir" in reference to the owner of a mill that is about to close "...700 tons of metal a day, now, sir, you tell me the world's

changed..." It is clear that the power of the owner has not escaped our songwriters. They know that the mill, then and now, is still "yes sir, no sir, yes sir." Finally, Kahn's mill worker, upon seeing his job end, issues a plea to an "off stage mill owner:" "Tell me where I will go, tell me where I will go." Even at the end of the day our worker is politely looking for help from the "boss man."

Conclusions

We are very much aware that contemporary music attempts to deliver a message through words, voice, rhythm, and instrumentation. We are also aware that there is drama, exaggeration, and shock value in these songs. Having noted this, have these songwriters depicted a set of conditions that actually exist? And have they accurately portrayed the mood of the people that live and work in those communities? By focusing on the themes of being forced to leave their homes, of the loss of a place to work, on the erosion of self esteem, of monotony in the workplace, and of the paternalistic nature of these communities, the answer is a qualified yes.

In the first instance, all of these songs focus on the mill community as a "closed set." It is a place where one cannot leave due to familial or economic factors. It is a place where one's role in the workplace and community is pre-ordained. And it is a place of hard, tiring work. We have noted these communities all over the Northeast and Midwest. They tend to be in small valleys outside of metropolitan areas. They are dominated by the old mill that always seems to be hanging on. They are tired places, with shut-up shops, buildings that need paint, and people that need nutritional help.

These are frequently angry places. However, we cannot conclude that they are any more angry than other places that have suffered economic restructuring. We do be-

lieve, however, that there is a greater sense of frustration in mill towns because of the typical dependency on one industry and one employer; one's work depends on the mill and "as the mill goes, so goes the community." We have heard this phrase countless times. The fact that personal life, economic life, and social life are bound together in a mill town can result in a degree of claustrophobia. They are not places for people who question the status quo!

There is also resentment. Interestingly, we heard this resentment expressed more often toward absentee landlords and the federal government than anyone else.

When the mill is owned by a local resident and there is a cutback or closing, workers show a degree of acceptance and understanding; owner and worker are in the enterprise together. An exemplary case is the recently burned Malden Mills owned by Aaron Feuerstein. Mr. Feuerstein, after the factory burned, continued to pay his workers for several months while he rebuilt. When Mr. Feuerstein ultimately had to lay off several hundred of his employees, his workers fully understood.

Interestingly, Mr. Feuerstein has been treated as a local hero (Uchitelle 1996, C1). And yet, many stock analysts grumbled that his actions cost the shareholders thousands of dollars. Clearly Wall Street would not have made the same decisions. We are still waiting for a song about Mr. Feuerstein! We can contrast Mr. Feuerstein's actions with Maxmaster Tool Company after an outsider, George Delaney, took charge:

Much of what Delaney ordered seemed irrational, if not downright stupid to Burgmaster employees. They tended to ascribe different reasons to his actions, but the simplest explanation was the most popular. Delaney was a 'round peg in a square hole'...(Holland).

We can also contrast Mr. Feuerstein's actions with the recent decision of the Ecko

company to leave Easthampton, Massachusetts and move to Ohio. "It's just business," its spokesperson announced. There is great bitterness in Easthampton (Reidy 1997, C3).

In a final analysis, as Laurence F. Gross has noted, there is need to change how management and labor interact: "Solutions must address the nature of the relationship between ownership and labor, and in turn that between industry and its environment. Industry must not only avoid creating policies in communities, but also reverse the policies which subjugate, diminish, and alienate labor" (Gross 1993, 246). Perhaps management should listen to the music.

We should not get carried away with the negative aspects of mill life, however. As tough as life was (and is) there still was and is a strong sense of regional community in these places. One sees pride of work, product, and community; a commitment to home and family; and a desire to better personal life. We have noted this fact in our earliest mill communities well into the present (Mrozowski 1995, 83).

And despair? It exists. The workers see their jobs evaporating, their skills becoming outmoded, and their wages falling. We recently saw this in a New York tool shop where three highly-skilled tap and die makers were carefully finishing a new machine part. They were honored craftsmen and were treating the material as if it were gold. Juxtaposed to these men was a young man, a recent graduate of a vocational tech school. He was making the same parts on a computer guided machine. The difference was that the young man's product was made quicker, cheaper, and better than the craftsmen. This phenomenon has been noted by William Julius Wilson in his seminal work entitled *When Work Disappears*: "...highly skilled designers, engineers, and operators are needed for the jobs created by the development of a new set of computer-operated machine tools, an advance that also

eliminates jobs for those trained only for manual assembly-line work (Wilson 1996, 152)." The days of the old craftsmen are numbered.

In short, the themes noted in contemporary music, given their drama and exaggeration, are reflective of the mood of the people in the places where we have worked. Mill town residents live the stories of the music, and, by listening carefully to the words of these songs, we, as regional administrators, planners, and economic development officials, are better able to understand the "gut-level" sentiments of our working constituency. Better communication and better planning seem to result. Against this backdrop, life continues, dreams continue, and the survival instincts are sharp: "Weave and spin, weave and spin." The stuff that songs—and regions—are made of still plays out along the Mohawk Trail. ■

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